

Ophidia

The constellation Ophiuchus is said to represent a man in the coils of a snake, and though both the celestial equator and the ecliptic pass through it, but it is not counted among the signs of the zodiac.

The days were already burning
when we crossed the river

east toward Quartzsite, mini-mall of rock
hounds and geode hunters, smalltime

gamblers in the flea market
of open sky. We slept

out on BLM land among a colony
of rubbertramps

in the desert, nothing but nebulae
to watch for, dark matter fallen

from under the eyelids of stars.
Out here our Ophiuchus

was made of serrate and spike,
or had a venomous bite. It held the dark

in its mouth limp as mammal
holding a smaller animal might slip unseen

past someone with a .12 gauge, pockets
rattling with shells as the teeth of a coyote

rattle in their sockets when its skin, sun-
tanned, peels back at the places insects

no longer swarm. I gave food
to a man I saw sleeping

in a gully by the dunes
who seemed to speak

no language at all. Three days
later, I found him walking

a highway that crossed
a cleft in the mountains, and our faces

lit to see each other. Do you need
anything, I asked? Water,

a little money? No,
he shook his head gleefully.

He was on his way to Houston
for a check, he'd be back for another

the next month, and his dead brother's
unclaimed disability pay

was waiting already in a P.O. box
in Palm Desert. The day meted

out its veil of heat, shimmering
over the blacktop, singing

in the rails of train tracks
that ran gleaming beside us in the sun.

How can one lonesome ghost,
I wondered, spin his own rope

to rappel us in the end
into the underworld, and keep himself

well-enough fed on bread
and sardines at once? Somewhere

a man is picking birdshot
from meat. Somewhere

he's catching moths
in his two cupped hands. The flame

of a match that flares
at the tip of his cigarette

before he draws in his breath
deepens the darkness

that falls just beyond
his illuminated face.

Valediction

Poem that begins with an image from Octavio
Paz's childhood, taken from an interview

My earliest memory
 is aboard a train, drowsing. My mother
covers my eyes
 suddenly with her hand, startling

me awake. Light spills
 between her fingers, then a long shadow,
hanging from a pole.
 Flag of civil

wars, swaying
 on its rope. Anyone old enough
to understand
 grew into something like a beggar

without his bowl, a thief
 in a county where no one's pockets sing
with coins. I still can't slip
 out of the skin

of the dead; will I always feel washed
 by moonlight
on a battlefield where even now
 the luminous effigy of war

is burning? A young boy steals
 from the house where his family waits
in darkness. A seam of light
 seeps from the mouth of the well,

and he lifts its cover. Peering in,
 he finds the moon
guttering on dark
 water. He inhales, emits

a dim glow as algae
 illumines water in the wake
of a boat. Soldiers
 are stationed watchkeeping

along the roads of his county. They lie
 asleep as animals
bedded down
 at their tethers. One covers

the back of his neck
 with his hand, as if warding away a blow
in his sleep.